

# Digital Media Arts

**As Terrain for Inter-cultural Political Activism**

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A Dissertation Submitted in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of  
Creative Arts, University of Technology, Sydney, 2014.

## **Certificate Of Authorship/Originality**

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text. I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Signature of Candidate



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Date: 30 / 06 / 2014

## Acknowledgements

Firstly I would like to thank my father Joseph Dahdal who passed away when I was 20 years old. My father was a thinker, an activist and an idealist. For that I owe him a great deal, for making me examine politics and life beyond the local issues and concepts in a more holistic and worldly manner, this research is inspired by him. Secondly I would like to thank my grandmother Helen Batshon who encouraged me to do this, who was the first to get a call from me five years ago when I decided to embark on this journey. My entire family have been supportive of me throughout and so I thank you for putting up with my absence when I should have been there more for you. Thank you Salma my wife, Isabella and Leora my beautiful daughters and thank you to my mother for bringing me up with principles and for giving me the power to persevere.

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# Preface

This creative doctorate is an extension of twenty-five years of work in the new media industry and thirty years back to the early days at university as a student activist organizing demonstrations against the regime in Jordan. When I decided that I was to embark on this journey of creative practice-led research my main goal was to see if it was at all possible for social media to contribute in a meaningful way to social change. This was a considerable time before the Arab Spring and WikiLeaks were big stories in the mainstream media. Much has changed since the early days when I embarked on this research in late 2009. The question of the role of social media in participatory activism has changed from an 'if' to a 'how?', 'why?' and 'to what degree?' Some of the early questions of my research were to be somewhat answered through the facts as they appeared on the streets and through the numerous papers (and books) written about the Arab Spring – specifically the role of social media in the events that have taken place in the last few years. In terms of my research position, this was a big change from the early days when my question about social media as an enabler was looked at with a great deal of uncertainty. The main premise of this argument is now well documented both in literature and popular culture.

I am an artist before I am a researcher, but both are mutually inclusive. Furthermore, I am an activist before I am an artist. Again the two roles are closely entwined, so that in effect this has been a project of passion. Its auto-ethnographic nature means that the 'I' and 'it' are hard to separate. This also means that occasionally throughout this exegesis I will refer to my history as an activist, which is a significant factor contributing to the discussion; this should be seen in the light of the creative work and the research auto-ethnographic approach.

The creative project, consisting of three major online and offline campaigns and an interactive documentary (attached to this exegesis), is an organic dynamic work that relied heavily on constant feedback; the reactions and interactions of those who engaged with it. For this reason, I want it to be quite clear that while this project has been solely created, designed and developed by me, it was also shaped by the contribution of those who chose to engage with the content and sometimes even volunteered themselves to generate actions and content. Finally, this project and thesis is only a beginning that others might build on in order to better understand how can we use new technologies to generate positive and effective engagements with participatory politics and social change, to make the world we live in that bit more pro-active rather than re-active.

## Writing Style

In the writing of this exegesis I not only document the creative project and answer the question of this creative doctorate, but also place it in a wider context that involves me

Sample diary note taken on: date @ time

Description goes here – these are notes that I have written to myself using an iPhone documenting App. They are not edited and are often written on the fly in an informal language. They might also contain typos that are left as is in the spirit of capturing that moment.

the writer, you the reader and an experiential journey aimed at capturing that elusive process of creative ethnographic research, which is not easily communicated in writing. My approach to capturing that spirit of the process is to pepper my writing with some of the diary notes I wrote along the way. These notes were hurriedly written, sometimes on a bus, often in the middle of a conversation or while watching TV. There are two things to keep in mind in regard to the nature and content of these notes: one, they will be stylistically and thematically separate from the narrative. Hence they might not appear to relate directly to some of the other things said on their particular page. However, often they do. To make it less distracting I have styled these notes in self-contained boxes like the example above. In order to be true to the thoughts of the time, I have not edited these notes; I merely present them, as they serve a secondary conceptual (sometimes atmospheric) purpose.

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## Abstract

The increasing use of social media in politics is creating new opportunities for greater public engagement in participatory political activism, raising important questions about the most effective ways for activists and independent artists to use social media. This creative doctorate explores the role that social media can have in shaping Australia's multicultural policies by engaging a wider section of the community in a cultural conversation. The creative component, *Talking Cultures*, is a campaign-based multimedia project that experimentally applies a hybrid model of online and offline campaigns, utilising social media and street art to elicit civic engagement. The major creative outcome of these campaigns is an interactive documentary that connects the street videos with social media exploring the creation of a 'contact zone' of engagement. From a theoretical perspective the research explores the implications of applying the contact theory of social studies to social media campaigns as a way to establish contact and create online political participatory actions within the frame of a 'contact zone'.

The research approach looks at participatory activism in the context of the communicative ecology of multicultural Australia as debated in the mainstream media, on social media and on the street. Using auto-ethnographic action research methods I examine the creative process of implementing *Talking Cultures*, through the artist's iterative attempts at engagement. The research concludes with two key findings. The first is that beneficial to the success of any social media campaign is a hybrid model of engagement that operates on social media and also offline. The second is that in order for a 'contact zone' to be established there is a need for an authority that is not easily attainable solely through social media. This authority can be established by engaging an online personality, enlisting an existing established social media community, or by conducting part of the campaign offline.

The *Talking Cultures* campaigns' results conclude that it is possible to engage the public in participatory political activism using social media but that for this engagement to be strong enough to spill over to the offline sphere, all pillars of the contact theory must be met, especially the need for an authority that can add value to the message. Furthermore it is suggested that social media campaigns should frame their message in a way that would encourage participant to perform offline actions outside the social media platforms into a wider communicative ecology.



## **Keywords**

Social Media Activism, Social Movements, Participatory Politics, Civic Engagement, Social Change, Online Activism, Multiculturalism, Contact Theory, Contact Zone, Communicative Ecology, Ethnographic Action Research, Auto-ethnography, Facebook, Social Media, Internet, Twitter, YouTube, Networked Societies, Negative Contact, Flash Mob, Virtual Flash Mob, Transmedia Documentary, Interactive Documentary, Web Documentary.